

**Independent Review Service
For Looked After Children
ANNUAL REPORT 2014- 2015**



Rutland
County Council

Report Author: Janet Marriott
Safeguarding Quality Assurance Manager
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STATUS OF THE REPORT

The Annual Report for the Independent Review Service is a requirement under the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010. The Independent Review Service Handbook (statutory guidance) states that Managers of the Independent Review Service should provide an Annual Report for the scrutiny of the Corporate Parenting Board.

This report is structured in accordance with the headings prescribed in the guidance issued as part of the Independent Review Officers Handbook. The Independent Review Officers Handbook provides supplementary guidance for use by Independent Review Services in relation to the Care Planning Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010.

The report highlights areas of good practice in addition to areas that need further improvement to ensure the needs of Looked After Children are met both in the short term day to day care and long term aspirations to prepare children for success in adulthood.

It is also a review of the trends and emerging themes from the reviews of Looked After Children providing information that may contribute to the strategic plans of the Local Authority in fulfilling its corporate parenting duties.

1. PURPOSE OF SERVICE AND LEGAL CONTEXT

The appointment of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is a legal requirement under S118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2001. The 2004 Regulations require all Local Authorities to appoint an IRO to participate in statutory meetings to review the Care Plan of each Looked After Child. The IRO is also responsible for monitoring the performance of the Local Authority's functions in respect of each review. If appropriate and if there is an unmet need for a Looked After Child, the IRO can refer the child to the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) who may consider legal actions on behalf of the child against the Local Authority.

2. RESPONSES TO RECOMMENDATIONS MADE IN THE ANNUAL REPORT 2013-2014

2.1. Recommendations for the IRO Service 2014-2015

- 2.1.1 Embed the quality assurance process with the social worker, team manager and Head of Service in accordance with the agreed Quality Assurance Framework 2014 - 2015.

Response: This is still an area requiring improvement. Disruption to management team, coupled with the absence of any Governance agreements has prevented any method of communication being established in order to provide regular quality assurance information that is embedded.

- 2.1.2 Develop further good relationships with CAFCASS by reviewing working practice in accordance with the national protocol.

Response: There is a good operational relationship between the IRO and Guardian ad Litem in care proceedings.

- 2.1.3 Ensure that the IRO service makes things happen for Looked After Children by continuing to monitor the progress of decisions about children and young people's plans in between review meetings.

IRO's have asked for updates on care planning tasks in between reviews. This should ensure the result of increased responsiveness to children and young people feeling that things are being changed. This response will continue into 2015-2016.

2.2 Recommendations for the Organisation 2014-2015:

2.2.1 The timescale for the availability of social work reports still needs to be improved.

Response: This remains an area for improvement. A rise in care proceedings and number of children looked after and children subject to child protection plans has placed additional demand on the service.

2.2.2 More foster placements are secured locally for teenagers requiring placements.

Response; Fostering team are actively seeking to recruit carers for teenagers.

2.2.3 Further consideration is given to ensure there is provision to accommodate sibling groups.

Response: There are two families registered who can now take a sibling group of three.

2.2.4 Children who no longer need to be subject to a placement order should have those orders revoked as agreed in their care plans and review meetings.

Response: We now have legal panels and will monitor progress in respect of these children.

2.2.5 Strategic discussions are held with CAMHS to ensure that CAMHS services meet the needs of Rutland children. In particular,

(i) Further developments are made to ensure there is a menu of specialist services available to help children in a more timely way when they don't meet the criteria for CAMHS.

(ii) Strategic discussions are held with CAMHS to ensure that CAMHS services meet the needs of Rutland children.

(iii) Consideration is given to help children make successful transitions between CAMHS services or newly needing CAMHS services when placed out of county

Response: CAMH's services are commissioned regionally and further work is being undertaken to understand the needs of LAC and care leavers across Rutland and Leicestershire. This needs analysis will be used to help re-commission services to better meet the needs of this group of children and young people.

(iv) Health Assessment outcomes are referred to in social workers' reports for reviews and any suggested changes to meet children's needs are given attention and care plans updated accordingly.

Response: Work is ongoing in this area to improve and track the timeliness of health assessments and ensuring that they are included in proposed revisions to children's care plans at their review meetings.

2.3 Recommendations for the Organisation 2015-2016

2.3.1 The timescale for the availability of social work reports still needs to be improved. Social work reports should be available 3 days before initial reviews and 5 days before review meetings.

2.3.2 More foster placements are secured locally for teenagers requiring placements.

2.3.4 Children who no longer need to be subject to a placement order should have those orders revoked as agreed in their care plans and review meetings.

- 2.3.5 To meet full regulatory compliance, care plans should be circulated within 10 working days of the review meeting
- 2.3.6 Some administrative errors have resulted in adoption applications being held up following their lodging with court. This is an area for improvement for both the operational and adoption services.
- 2.3.7 A Looked after Children Strategy should incorporate core policies in respect of Special Guardianship, Connected Persons and the recently issued statutory guidance in respect of Permanence, Long term Foster placements and ceasing to be looked after. This would improve the clarity in respect of children and young people's entitlements when they come into/leave care.

2.4 Recommendations for the IRO Service 2015-2016

- 2.4.1 Continue to monitor care plans in between reviews in proportion to need.
- 2.4.1 Provide monthly performance reports to the authority's management group about the quality of the service for looked after children and the conduct of the IRO service.

3. QUANTITATIVE INFORMATION ABOUT THE IRO SERVICE

3.1 At the end of March 2015 there were 34 Looked after Children. This is the same number compared to the end of March 2014.

3.2 Staffing

3.2.1 The Authority employs one full time member of staff who is the Child Protection Conference Chair and Independent Review Officer Service. The officer also has a quality assurance function. In addition, there is a full time safeguarding administrator who looks after the convening and organisational aspects of the service. The administrator left the service in December 2014. A new administrator was appointed on 30th March 2015. This has presented some challenges to the delivery of the service. This has placed pressure on the total delivery of the service including the Quality Assurance function.

3.2.2 In order to provide a contingency and flexible response the service also employs some independent workers. The service has continued to provide a service to children and young people this year as before. This means that the same worker has continued as the Independent Review Officer (IRO) for those children who have needed further safeguarding when a child protection plan has not been sufficient. The full time employee and independent workers are of white British origin and female. This ethnicity generally reflects that of the population of Looked After Children in Rutland.

3.2.3 29 Looked After Children are supported by the full time employee and the remaining 5 children are supported by the independent employee.

3.3 Newly Accommodated Children

3.3.1 14 Children have been newly accommodated since April 2014. This compares to 13 in 2013-2014. 6 young people were accommodated under S20 of the 1989 Children Act this year: 1 unaccompanied asylum seeking young person this year (compared to 4 last). 2 disabled young people, 1 young person was accommodated following an assessment meeting the Southwark judgement (homeless and at risk), 1 due to family unable to provide accommodation through ill health and 1 from a former care leaver requesting a return to care after a period of independence. The authority has applied appropriate threshold decisions in agreeing these placements. The 8 remaining children have been made subject of care proceedings.

3.3.2 At the end of the year, of the 14 newly accommodated children, 4 have subsequently ceased to be accommodated because they have either been made subject of a Special Guardianship Order (1 child), left the service to return home (1 child), or left care as older young people to become care leavers (2 young people). Of the remaining 10 children, 3 have been made subject to care and placement orders and 2 placed with adoptive carers. The third child has a match family identified. 4 more are subject to interim care orders and waiting for a conclusion to the proceedings at court. 3 are the young people accommodated under S20. They all have plans to return home, or stay in care.

3.4 Children Previously in Care

3.4.1 Of the wider cohort of Looked After Children not newly accommodated in the year: 7 children are waiting for their adoption hearings to be heard. 17 children are all permanently placed with their carers. Of the 17, 15 children remain subject to Care Orders. 2 are looked after under S20 1989 Children Act. 1 child's carers are being assessed following notification to the authority of their intention to apply for a Special Guardianship Order.

3.4.2 There are significant strengths in the Local Authority's arrangements to assess and plan early for young people leaving care and this is further evidenced in the outcomes that they have achieved this year. 6 Young people left care to live independently this year. 5 were all at college/training or in work.

3.4.3 The accommodation secured for all care leavers has been of a consistently good standard. Some stayed in supported lodgings provided when first accommodated. One young person stayed with his carers under the Staying Put Scheme.

3.5 Applications for Care Proceedings

3.5.1 There have been 7 applications made to safeguard children through care proceedings this year, compared to 11 last year. 1 application related to 1 sibling group of three the rest were for individual children. 4 children, which includes the sibling group whose applications were made later in the year are yet to have their plans resolved in Court. The other 3 applications have been resolved by the granting of Special Guardianship Orders for 1 child; and care orders with placement orders for 3 children. 2 of the latter group are placed with adoptive families and 1 child is presently waiting.

3.5.2 Public Law Outline

3.5.3 There is a continued trend to ensure timely resolution in care proceedings. All of the completed proceedings have concluded within 26 weeks. There are two sets of proceedings waiting to be finalised. One is delayed (due to the late availability of a specialist assessment), the other is on track for an Issues Resolution Hearing. There is a good relationship between CAFCASS and the Independent Review Service. Liaison takes place around reviews and key decision points to ensure that the IRO and CAFCASS officers hand important care planning matters over prior to and once proceedings are concluded. Guardians have attend children's review meetings, if not they have received reports of those meetings.

3.5.4 Active planning has taken place during proceedings to ensure children will have the best chance to find their new families when adoption is agreed as the best option. The three children who were made subject of a placement order this year were placed with their new families or will be under 8 weeks of the order or very soon after.

3.6 Performance

3.6.1 Table one illustrates the performance of the service since 1st April 2014. 99 (compared to 102 in 2013/14) reviews have been convened. 100% of these have been within timescales.

Table 1: LAC Reviews April 2014 – March 2015

Number of reviews			
Boys		Girls	
43	40%	56	60%

3.6.2 Review meetings happen 20 days after a child has come into care and then every 3 and 6 months. Some children therefore have more than one review in a year. Early reviews will be requested by the IRO when there is a particular concern about the progress of a care plan this has happened in one adoption case and one child whose placement disrupted this year.

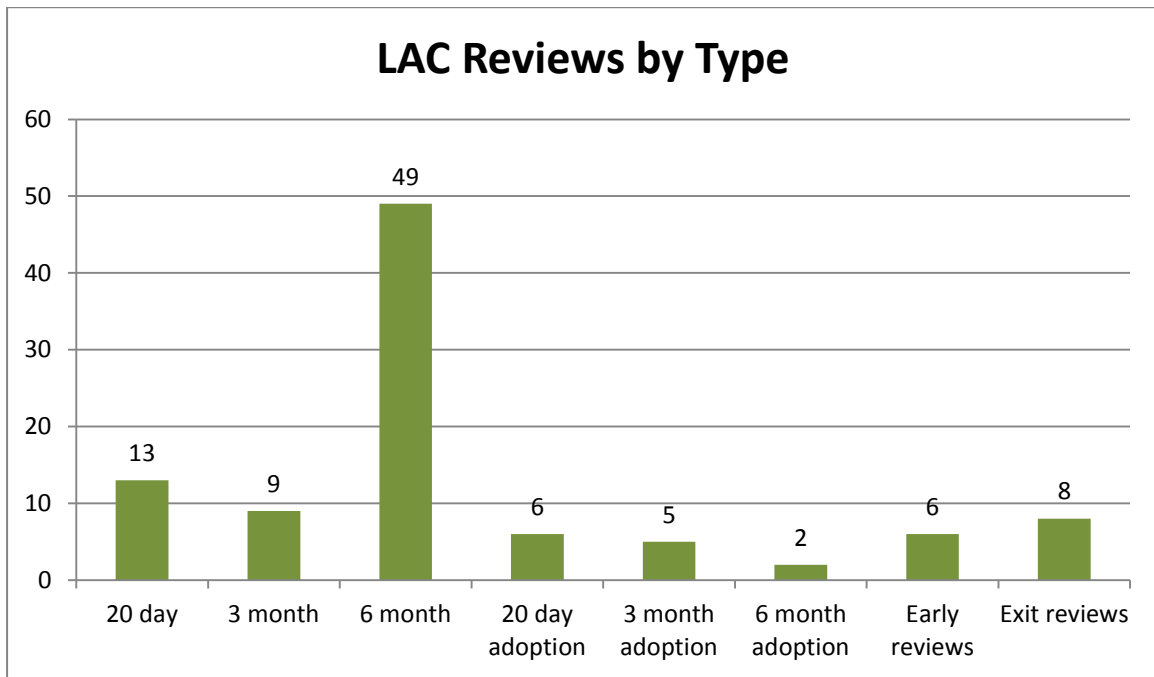


Figure 1: LAC Reviews by Type

4. QUALITATIVE INFORMATION ABOUT THE IRO SERVICE

4.1 Involving Agencies and Carers in Review Meetings

4.1.1 Feedback has been sought from a range of agencies and Local Authority staff as well as foster parents in relation to how well they feel prepared and involved in review meetings and how speedily the decisions and reports are returned to them following the meetings.

4.1.2 The majority of carers and other professionals told us that:

- i.** They attended meetings
- ii.** The purpose of the meeting was clearly explained
- iii.** They had received a copy of the IRO's last report
- iv.** They had received an invitation to the review meeting in a timely way
- v.** They had received and completed the carer's consultation booklet (or in the case of others found the meeting familiar and thus were able to make a contribution without the prompt booklet).
- vi.** They were able to give their views in review meetings
- vii.** They were listened to
- viii.** They were treated with respect
- ix.** They were able to ask questions
- x.** They understood the decisions made at reviews.

4.1.3 There are regulatory requirements that ensure that review invitations, decisions of reviews and the chairs report are distributed in good time. Figures 2-4 illustrate the extent to which these requirements have been met.

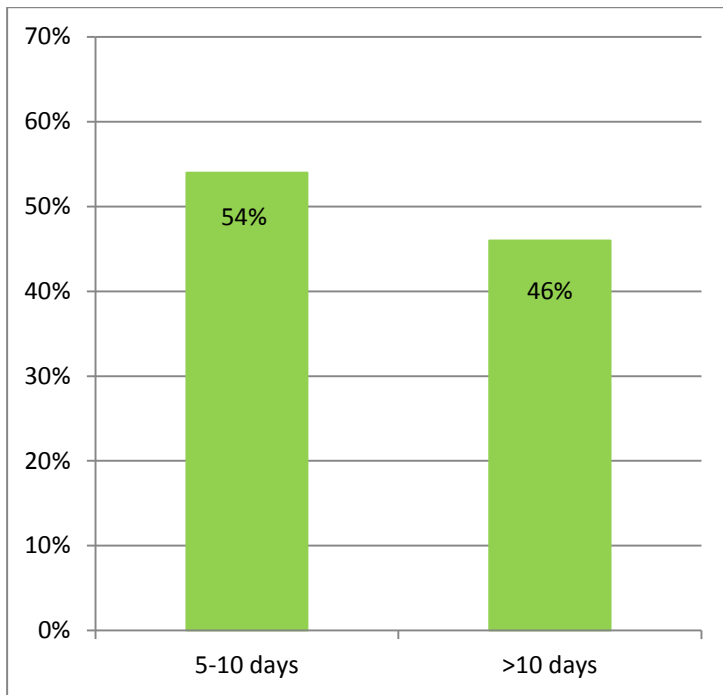


Figure 2: Distribution of Invitations

Target (working days)

Local: 10

Regulatory: 10

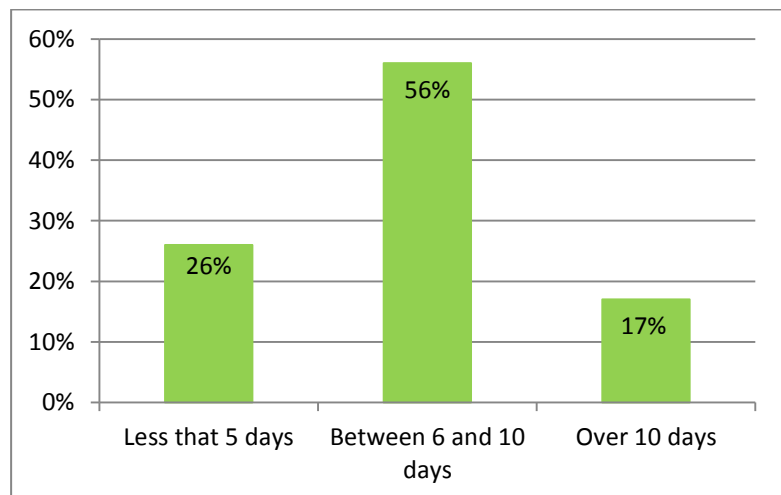
Figure 3:

Distribution of Chair's Report

Target (working days)

Local: 7

Regulatory: 20



4.2 Children's Participation in Reviews

4.2.1 The ages of the children currently looked after at the end of March 2015:

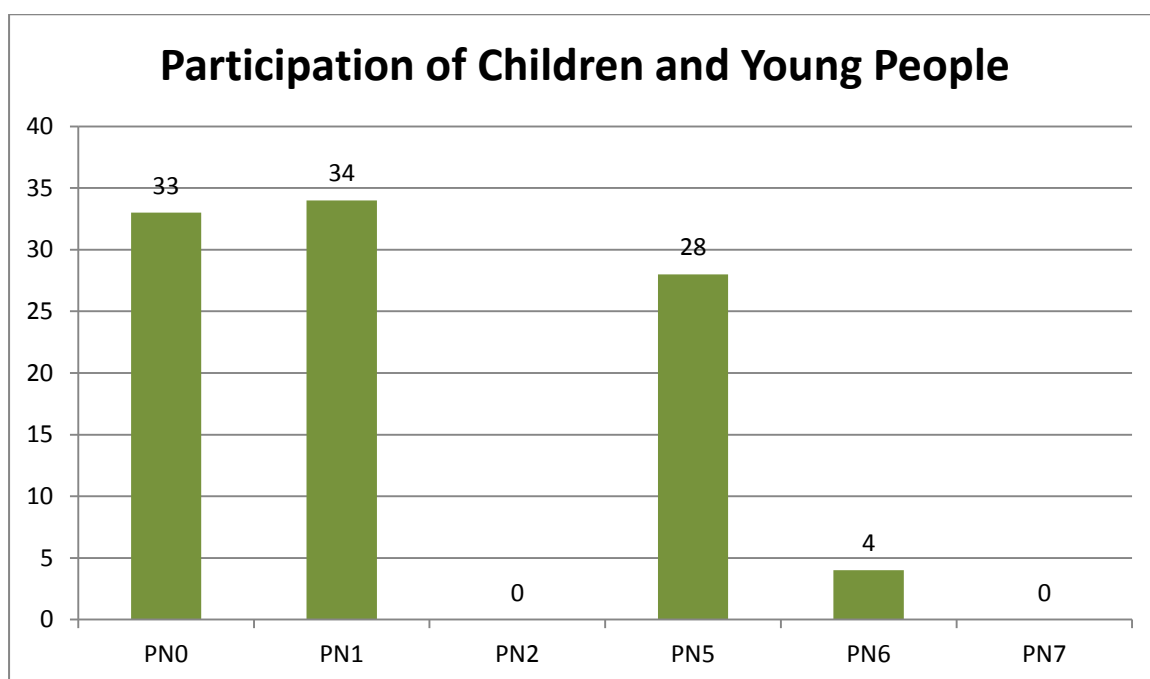
Children under 5	13
Children under 8	4
Children under 11	3
Children under 16	8
Young people under 18	6

4.2.2 Of these, 33 are white British and 1 are other ethnic backgrounds. One of the children is disabled.

4.2.3 Every newly accommodated young person has been allocated an IRO. The service sends a personal/photographic letter to any child over the age of 8 naming their IRO and the safeguarding administrator.

4.2.4 The IRO writes or sends a copy of the review to all children under the age of 16 with details about the review discussion as a reminder of the decisions agreed. In some instances the IRO has also written to young people over the age of 16 if it is felt that the report may be more difficult to understand. Table 2 illustrates how children and young people have been involved in their meetings.

Table 2: Participation of Children and Young People



PN0	Child aged under 4 at time of the review	33
PN1	Physically attends and speaks for his or her self	34
PN2	Physically attends and an advocate speak on his or her behalf	0
PN5	Child does not attend but briefs an advocate to speak for his or her self	28
PN6	Child does not attend but conveys his/her feelings by a facilitative medium	4
PN7	Child does not attend, nor are his or her views conveyed to the review	0
		<hr/> 99

4.2.5 Children and young people nearly always come to their review meetings or we hold a series of meetings to accommodate their ideas about how they would like to be involved. One young person has used an advocate this year in order to feel their wishes and views following their placement disruption.

The social worker responsible for the child's case reaches an agreement in consultation with the child or young person in relation to who they would like to invite and how and where they would like their review meetings to happen. A variety of approaches are used, sometimes children under the age 5 the IRO arranges home visits to observe the children in familiar environments or in the case of babies they have attended their review meetings with their carer. Children between the age of 5 and 9 have sometimes preferred to see the IRO in their placement. This has also applied to some older young people who have met the IRO in café's or home rather than attend the meeting part.

Most children and young people complete the consultation booklets designed to help them have their say in review meetings. The service also works with the social work team to ensure there is adequate planning to include parents. Some reviews are run as a series of meetings so that the IRO meets with parents separately should they not feel able to attend a meeting.

Children and Young People have told us that they value the IRO because:

1. "She has been through a lot with me we have had our ups and downs but she has helped me get to where I am now".
2. "She helped me get contact with my siblings".
3. "I have my say at review meetings. My IRO helps me to get my points and feelings across during the meetings. I also get along with her very well which helps".
4. "I am asked where I would like my review to be held".
5. "I think that people listen to me in review meetings".

6. "I get a letter or report from my IRO after the meeting".
7. One young person said that they hadn't seen a copy of their care plan.

4.2.6 The IRO ensures that Guardians are invited to reviews. The IRO makes introductions to the Guardian appointed to the proceedings to represent the child and maintains contact until the end of the process. Review records are sent to the Guardian throughout. The revised National protocol in relation to ensuring the two services work effectively together to help Looked After Children has been signed by the authority.

4.2.7 OFSTED published a report called 'Independent Reviewing Officers: Taking up the Challenge' (Ofsted June 2013). Of the findings contained in the report of the 10 Local Authorities who had been subject to this focused inspection into their IRO service, one of the challenge areas identified was the requirement of the IRO to monitor the child's plan in between review meetings. IROs have adopted a practise of writing to social workers in between review meetings and ask about the progress of some of the more salient decisions made at reviews. This is proving effective and instils a further focus to ensure tasks agreed in reviews and care plans work for children and young people.

5. CONDUCT OF THE ORGANISATION IN RELATION TO THE REVIEW

- 5.1 The social work team has continued to be relatively stable this year with established workers who provide continuity for the child and carers. This means that children, young people and their families are able to develop a good working relationship based on a level of trust and common understanding of their needs.
- 5.2 There has been a good response from the Authority in relation to working with the service proactively to ensure positive and timely reviews for children, young people and their families. 100% of reviews are held within timescale. An area for improvement lies in ensuring that social work reports are available 3 days before initial reviews and 5 days before review meetings. Review reports are mostly provided on the day before the meeting.
- 5.3 Care plans are always available and have been revised in between review meetings so they are used openly in review meetings to revise plans according to the child's needs. To meet full regulatory compliance they should be circulated within 10 working days of the review meeting
- 5.4 Pathway plans have been available in all cases for the review after the child's 16th birthday and within three months of them reaching their 16th birthday. Young people who have arrived in care later than their 16th birthday have also been assessed for Pathway plans read for their final reviews. The leaving care adviser is introduced to young people once the Pathway plan has been completed and takes a pro-active role at the right stage if the young person is planning to leave care. This includes providing advice about entitlements post care.
- 5.5 Carers always attend and often host review meetings for children. Agency attendance is good. This is also the case when children are placed out of county. Social workers have made good use of school and health staff in different local authority areas to ensure that the child is seen by relevant

professionals. Reviews about children under the age of 5 often include a health visitor who has often known the child since birth, will have supported the child protection plan and is familiar with the needs of the child and family. The reviews of pre-school children will include the nursery officers, the inclusion team if needed and the health visitor. When children are placed out of county school staff have been included in looked after reviews. Locally, termly PEP meetings are held and the records made available for the IRO in between review meetings. This has meant that school staff are not always attending LAC reviews but generally have been willing to do so if the young person has preferred or it has been deemed useful for accuracy of holistic planning for a child.

6. CONDUCT OF THE ORGANISATION IN RELATION TO THE CASE

- 6.1 Notwithstanding the above, the IRO service has raised some alerts in relation to concerns about practice in relation to the service provided to Looked after Children this year. The dispute resolution policy is used for cases where there is on-going concern about an issue which needs to be escalated. The dispute resolution process is an agreed procedure where cases are raised firstly with Team Managers and then if not satisfactorily resolved to the Head of Service and then the Assistant Director. Responses are required within 5 working days to prevent any further delay. At any stage during the dispute resolution process the IRO has the authority to refer cases to CAFCASS if the IRO considers it appropriate to do so.
- 6.2 During the year there have been 3 recorded escalations. These remain unresolved and relate to the need to apply for the revocation of placement orders. There have been no cases referred to CAFCASS.
- 6.3 The long term team manager responds expediently to the decisions made at review meetings. In order to provide clearer evidence of the manager's view about the decisions reached at reviews a new Management Decision Record has been devised which provides and responds within given timescales to

review reports provided by the IRO. This is provided to the social worker so that decisions can be tracked between review meetings.

6.4 Care planning placement and review regulations require that a child should have a plan to achieve a permanent resolution to their needs; this plan should be available for their second review meeting four months after they come into care. The IRO is aware that resource discussions have been held with Heads of Service during the year in order to confirm permanency decisions. There is openness to challenge should the IRO be concerned about the suitability of decisions in relation to individual children. All Looked after Children have had a plan for permanency available for their second review.

6.5 Social work practice is developing to accommodate the need for children to have placements within their families when they can't live at home. Policy required to support this practice is currently missing. For example, Special Guardianship, Connected Persons. A Looked after Children Strategy would incorporate these core policies and processes and improve the clarity in respect of children and young people's entitlements when they come into care.

6.6 The placement of teenagers continues to present challenges. All teenagers requiring placements beyond initial emergency responses have been placed out of county. The Looked young people have not made any specific complaints about these arrangements but it complicates care planning and creates some delays as local services are secured for them.

6.7 Foster placements able to accommodate a sibling group are also short in supply. Prior to admission and shortly after, there are family group conference meetings convened to try and identify extended family or friends who can meet the child's need in order to avoid accommodation.

6.8 Out of County placements

22 of the 34 Looked After Children are placed out of county. Further analysis identifies the children are placed as follows:

- i. 3 other children and young people live with a RCC approved carer who lives just outside of the county boundaries, under 10 miles away. Rutland is a small authority.
- ii. 1 young person lives with an Independent Foster Carer (IFA). This is a long term placement.
- iii. 1 young person is living in supported lodgings.
- iv. 1 young person is living in a residential setting which meets her needs as a disabled young person.
- v. 9 Children live with family and friends. 6 of these are subject to full care orders and 3 are subject to interim care orders.
- vi. 7 Children are in placement waiting for a date for their adoption applications to be heard.

6.9 One Looked after Child was reported missing this year prior to and following placement disruption. The IRO was kept aware of these events and the plans being made to reduce their frequency. This is now resolved.

There were no new instances of Looked After Children being assessed as vulnerable to Sexual Exploitation this year.

6.10 The adoption team is involved early and near to the review decision to support adoption as the preferred plan for the child. Good assistance and planning is then jointly undertaken by the adoption and social worker for the child to help prepare a child for adoption. There are 0 children waiting for adoptive families at present.

Some administrative errors have resulted in the applications being held up following their lodging with court. This is an area for improvement for both the operational and adoption services.

6.11 Education Training and Employment

6.12 All Looked after Children in Rutland have a school placement and educational progress is seen as paramount to ensuring good outcomes for the looked after population. Personal Education Planning meetings are held with 'needs led' frequency to ensure the right focus is maintained on the

progress of the child. In effect Children have PEP meetings most terms and not less than twice a year. This ensures that there is good monitoring of progress. Some children still benefit from the provision of additional tutors to help them gain confidence and make progress where needed. There are high aspirations for Looked After Children and plans are designed to ensure education and extra-curricular activities are not overlooked in order to promote self-esteem and confidence amongst the looked after community of children.

6.12.1 The Social Inclusion Development Officer coordinates regular PEP meetings and the Virtual Head Teacher provides an invaluable service in terms of oversight and scrutiny to ensure that all schools in or out of the county give Rutland's Looked After Children priority. In considering the cohort of children currently in the group there is no reason to suspect they will not continue to make good progress at school or college. Children preparing for secondary have been very well prepared to make a positive transition. Foster parents attend parents' evenings and place education as a priority.

6.12.2 The young people who left care this year are all in further education, training or work. Accommodation is always of a good standard and the Leaving Care Adviser has strong relationships with private and public housing providers.

6.13 Health

6.13.1 Health needs of Looked After Children, including the child's emotional health, require specific attention. There were a number of delayed health assessments during the year. The number of initial health assessments being available for the first review has not improved this year. Appointments are always in hand ready for discussion at the second review. The IRO tracks health plans at review meetings. A review of performance of all reviews over this year confirms that 26 health assessments were out of time. 17 were on time. 8 of the former

were overdue by no more than two months and were in the longer term cohort of children. A further 3 more were for children placed out of county but who had regular contact with a range of health services and thus the IRO was satisfied that there was good provision made for their needs. It is recommended that improving the timescales for health assessment completed on time is included in the improvement plans for 2015 - 2016.

- 6.13.2 Some Looked After Children need support to recover from significant emotional trauma. CAMHS provide consultation clinics to local authority foster carers who are helping children and young people recover. There is evidence that this has been helpful in supporting carers to provide care more suited to the child's particular attachment need.
- 6.13.3 Where the child has not met the criteria of the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) the Local Authority has funded private interventions - counselling (one case).
- 6.13.4 It has also been difficult to transfer children to CAMHS services when children are placed out of county and move before their needs are met.
- 6.13.5 Promoting the emotional well-being of Looked After Children placed with family and friends and located out of county has also provided challenges as social workers have attempted to negotiate through unfamiliar service thresholds. For families who might consider Special Guardianship Orders this has been an inhibiting issue.

6.14 Advocacy

- 6.14.1 The Targeted Youth service continues to provide the Authority's response to ensure that all Looked After Children have access to an advocate, if required.
- 6.14.2 There are 3 members of RCC staff who are National Youth Advisory Service (NYAS) accredited level 3 advocates. This year the Targeted

Youth Service has received 1 request for advocacy from Looked After Children (compared to 4 last year). Following initial contact, two young people decided that they did not wish to proceed with the service. The matter has been resolved with the young person being able to feel that they have been heard in respect of the issue they wanted to address.

6.15 Complaints

- 6.15.1 One Looked After Child has complained twice about a previous placement. One complaint is resolved the other is under investigation.

Janet Marriott

Safeguarding Quality Assurance Manager
June 2015